

5. SIGHT RECORD OF METAD *MILLARDIA MELTADA* GRAY (FAMILY: MURINAE) AROUND RATNAGIRI, WESTERN GHAT REGION

During my ten year stay in Kolhapur, Ratnagiri (Maharashtra), I toured the surrounding areas extensively, where a variety of mammals, birds and reptiles were observed.

On night trips, a number of metads *Millardia meltada* were seen in all types of terrain. Strangely enough, their movements were mostly recorded from north to south. On a stretch of 100 km, as many as 70 metads were seen at a time, all moving in the same direction. In order

to satisfy my curiosity, I back tracked occasionally and noticed the same behaviour. To my mind, this movement could be on account of foraging during the night for food.

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6. LESSER FRIGATE BIRD *FREGATA MINOR ALDABRENSIS* MATHEWS
A RARE RECORD FROM SÁLIM ALI BIRD SANCTUARY,
THATTAKAD, KERALA

Lesser frigate birds are recorded as accidental stragglers in the Indian subcontinent. There is only one specimen of the bird in the BNHS collection, a male which was storm-blown and entangled in a fishing net during the SW monsoon near Quilon in Kerala (S.H. Prater, *JBNHS* 33: 445). Apart from this, there are three sight records from Bombay during the SW monsoon (Taylor, *JBNHS* 51: 939). There are two specimens in the Colombo museum which were wrongly identified as *F. andrewsi*, but have since been corrected.

On July 1, 1998, a very weak frigate bird was seen on the lake edge of Sálim Ali Bird Sanctuary at Thattakad. There had been a strong wind with a speed of 75 kmph and heavy rain during the previous night. The Sálim Ali Bird Sanctuary is situated on the bank of Periyar river, and has a large waterbody constituted by the Periyar Valley Irrigation Project dam. The Sanctuary is mainly for tropical forest bird species. There are about 27 species of water birds recorded from the sanctuary, apart from the 300 species of forest birds. The sanctuary is about 75 km by road from the Arabian Sea coast (Cochin).

The specimen was taken to the Sálim Ali Wild Wings Trust research station at the Sanctuary headquarters. The bird was slightly bigger than a kite and also longer. It was brownish-black above with a white head, neck and belly. A prominent greyish-brown band was present on the breast. Hind neck feathers were white, becoming greyish-mottled towards the lower neck, tail deeply forked and black in colour. Tarsus short, fully feathered and webbed. Bill long, broader at the base, downcurved and hooked at the tip. The colour of the bill was greyish-blue, paler at the down curve and black at the tip. Nostrils unnoticeable, elongated slit almost at the base of the bill. Feet fleshy, grey with darker claws. Inner side of tarsus feathers were whitish, whereas the outer were dark brownish-black. Iris dark brown with a bluish-grey patch around the eyes. There was no moult except for the 1st tail feather on the left. All other tail feathers were old and worn out.

The identification of the bird was confirmed as *Fregata minor* for the following reasons: Black and white oceanic bird with long, pointed, streamlined wings, deeply forked tail, long bill, hooked at the tip, obsolete nostrils, short

and fully feathered tarsus with webs on the feet. Regarding the lesser frigate bird, 'female is the only frigate bird with white underparts and whitish throat', according to Alexander 1995; HANDBOOK Vol. 1, pp. 48. The bird is also suspected to be immature as the head and hind neck are white.

The first bird was recorded from Quilon in 1928 and this the second one from the Sálim Ali Bird Sanctuary, in 1998. This is the only female and immature specimen available in the Subcontinent now as per published records. The bird died after a day. When it was cut open its stomach was empty, and the ovary granular and ill developed. The stuffed specimen is displayed at the interpretation centre of the Sálim Ali Bird Sanctuary Museum.

Live measurements of the bird are as follows:

Wing	— 560 mm
Wing span	— 1,700 mm (57")
Bill (from feathers)	— 80 mm
Tarsus	— 25 mm
Middle toe	— 60 mm
Tail	— 125 mm (Inner) 228 mm (Outer)
Weight	— 680 gm

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7. PURPLE HERON *ARDEA PURPUREA* (LINN.) (ARDEIDAE) NESTING ON WATER HYACINTH *EICHHORNIA CRASSIPES* (PONTEDERIACEAE)

On April 29, 1997, we saw four nests of the purple heron *Ardea purpurea* on thick mats of water hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes* on Kanajari village pond, 10 km northwest of Anand (22° 32' N, 73° 00' E) in Kheda district, Gujarat. The four nests were 10-15 m apart and far away from some *Acacia* trees emerging from the tank. The nest material contained water hyacinth and dry thorny twigs. Initially we thought that somewhat grown young ones were standing on the water hyacinth, but soon realized that they were nestlings in their nest, when we saw adult birds arriving, with greeting calls, and feeding the young. There were 2 young ones in two nests and one in the 3rd nest, all 5 weeks of age. The fourth nest was in the incubation stage. Considering the age of the young, and the known incubation period i.e. 26 days (Hancock and Kushlan 1984), it can be presumed that the clutches were initiated in the first or second week of February. The heronry initiated on the *Acacia nilotica* trees standing within the pond

had two nests of purple heron in the nest building stage, and one in the early incubation stage. On the same date, other colonial water birds in the heronry were little egrets (9), large egrets (10), little cormorants (12) and white ibises (8). Foraging cattle egrets (15) were seen in breeding plumage, but they had not initiated nest building.

The nest of the purple heron is usually made of *Phragmites* or *Typha* stems and built on a flattened site in dense reed beds, rushes or papyrus (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Twig nests are also built in thickets in Asia (Ali and Ripley 1983, Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Hence, nesting on water hyacinth is a new record. Water hyacinth always floats on the water surface and hence the nest is safe against an increase in water level. The nests on *Phragmites* or *Typha* do not offer such safety. This observation indicates a prolonged breeding season (February to September or October) at a given site, with the probability of double nesting.